

A whopper of a shark tale

Coast
Lines
By Cindy Lane

LONGBOAT KEY – Tom Mayers thinks it may be the largest great white shark ever caught in the world. But even if it's not, it's still a whale of a shark.

Mayers lives at Lands End on the northern tip of Longboat Key, where the beast was landed in 1937.

His family owned the land, but Adolphus "Sharky" Holbrook was squatting on the property, living up to his nickname by running a "shark factory" there.

"He had a homemade still and he distilled shark liver oil and sold it to Parke Davis," recalls Marion Stuart, an Anna Maria Island resident who lived on Longboat Key in those days, when her name was Marion Gill.

Holbrook also sold shark skins for shoes and other leather goods and dried the fins and sold them in China and Japan as delicacies, she says, adding, "He would use the backbones to make walking sticks, and the jaws would be used for decoration."

Stuart says she used to go out on the boat with Sharky Holbrook and his crew, and watch as they pulled in the line, which had multiple hooks, using a chain and a roller system. Sometimes, 10 sharks would be on the line, maybe 10 feet long.

"They'd hit the sharks in the head with a hammer, then unhook the chain and drag the sharks behind the boat," she says, adding that sometimes, they shot them with a gun.

She wasn't on the boat that December day in 1937 when the big shark was caught, but she saw it at Lands End and heard the tale firsthand.

One of Holbrook's workers, Edgar Green, of Cortez, had gone out on Christmas Eve to check the lines. He discovered the great white shark on one of the hooks, still alive and plenty feisty. Green single-handedly towed the great fish, "Old Man and the Sea"-style, to Holbrook's shark factory, in what is now Mayers' backyard.

"He said that half the time the shark was pulling him and half the time he was pulling the shark," Stuart recalls.

Green discovered the shark only about 100 yards offshore, but didn't say so at the time, because it would have scared off all the tourists, Longboat Key historian Ralph Hunter says.



Edgar Green caught this huge, great white shark off the north end of Longboat Key in 1937.

It's like they said in "Jaws."

"It's all psychological. You yell 'baracuda!' and everybody says 'Huh, what?' You yell 'shark!' and we've got a panic on our hands on the Fourth of July."

Fast forward 50 years, as Mayers is sitting on his porch at Lands End, when who strolls up but Edgar Green himself?

Mayers is a history buff – his mother helped start the Longboat Key Historical Society – so he was thrilled to talk to Green, who told him the whopper of a tale.

"Green said he laid his poling oar down next to the shark and the shark was that length, plus the length of a person," said Mayers, who began asking around about how long a poling oar was. People say they were usually 12 feet long, which, adding another six feet for the height of a man, would mean the shark was 18 feet long.

Scary, but not a world record.

Then someone told him that a poling oar was 18 feet long. The more he asked, the more people confirmed it.

Roger Allen, of the Florida Maritime Museum in Cortez, messes about in historic boats for a living, making him somewhat of an expert on the historic lengths of poling oars in the historic fishing village.

He says a poling oar's average length is 16 to 18 feet. That plus another six feet for the height of a man would make Green's shark 22 to 24 feet long.

Scarier: And the largest great white shark ever caught in the world.

An Internet search shows a 21-foot great white as the record, but everyone knows not to believe everything you read, especially on the Internet.

Enter Robert Hueter, Mote Marine Laboratory's director of the Center for Shark Research, the largest research center dedicated to the scientific study of sharks in the world, speaking of a world record.

The largest great white shark reli-

ably measured was about 19 feet long, from Australia, Hueter says, adding that while reports of great white sharks over 20 feet long are common, they are also unverified.

Last week, Hueter examined a photograph of Green's shark.

He doesn't want to scare tourists either, but he's a Ph.D. and unlikely to fib.

Green's shark appears to be 15 feet long, he estimates, which would tip the scales at about 2,000 pounds.

That's one ton, and only four feet shy of the world record.

Still a whale of a shark.

So, was Green's great white shark a fluke, or do we need to worry about its offspring the next time we go to the beach?

"Great whites are usually caught offshore in the winter months," Hueter says, not close to shore like Green's shark.

Uh-huh. So how worried should we be?

"Many of them are large, in the 14 to 17 foot category."

Uh-huh. And how many of them did you say were out there?

"Great whites in the Florida Gulf are not common but are not rare either."

A scientist and a diplomat.

So how many are lurking locally off Longboat?

"Fortunately these animals are extremely rare in our coastal zone."

That's reassuring.

Until you realize that just 69 years ago, a great white shark merely four feet smaller than the world record was caught only 100 yards off Longboat Key, barely seven short miles down the beach from the Anna Maria Island Sun newsroom, as the shark swims.

To that, most would say "yikes."

But to those Edgar Green wannabes who want a piece of that, a word of advice from Chief Brody in "Jaws."

"You're gonna need a bigger boat."



SUN PHOTO/LAURIE KROSNEY
At left, the 9-foot, great white shark hangs suspended at Mote Marine.

PHOTO/CHUCK STEVENSON
At right, Dr. Bob Hueter checks the shark as Senior Biologist Debi Ingrao checks for supplies.



Mote prepares great white for exhibit

By Laurie Krosney
SUN STAFF WRITER

CITY ISLAND — An army of volunteers descended on the Mote Marine Laboratory last week to assist Senior Biologist Debi Ingrao prepare a 9-foot 4-inch great white shark for exhibit.

The shark, a juvenile female, was probably about five years old when she was taken off the coast of California, about five years away from reproductive age. She was by-catch of the halibut industry.

"A guy out there has a business where he takes the by-catch, especially the sharks, and preserves them to sell to labs and students," Ingrao said. "He drove it here on the back of a truck."

"It's sort of sad to see her and to know that she's not swimming free," she said. "But at least she wasn't thrown away like garbage and at least she'll help people learn about her species."

On Wednesday, May 3, straps were placed around the shark in the tank where it was suspended in propylene glycol. A forklift operator slowly and carefully lifted the shark and maneuvered it to a makeshift dissection table in the parking lot.

Bob Hueter, Mote's director of shark research, was checking her, touching

the snout and the skin.

"She's a beautiful animal," he said. "Do you notice the perfect torpedo shape of her body?" he asked.

The nose comes to a rounded point and it feels hard.

He points out the small, circular black markings around her nose.

"These help her smell her prey," he pointed out. "Sharks have an amazing sense of smell."

Hueter also notices the teeth.

"They've just started to triangulate," he said. "She was just beginning to change her diet. When great whites are very young, they have sharp, thin teeth that they use to eat fish. As they get older and more mature, they develop triangular teeth that they use to eat marine mammals. They use the teeth to tear large chunks from their prey."

The shark is laid on its side on the table. All the while, Ron Hall, a volunteer and an embalmer who helped Ingrao mount the giant squid exhibit at Mote, is spraying the shark's skin with liquid and rubbing gently.

"It's stuff we use on hair in human embalming," he said. "We want to keep the skin moist so she keeps her color."

As the shark is laid on her side on the table, it's Hall who does the actual dissection. He's using a carpet cutter.

"Sharks are very oily," Ingrao

explains. "They don't last on display, because of all the oil, so we have to remove all the internal organs."

The liver looks huge as it emerges from the shark's body.

"It's loaded with oil," Ingrao said. The oil is used in cosmetics and increasingly in holistic medications to boost the immune system, according to Ingrao. A check on the Internet reveals that the oil is also used as an aphrodisiac in Japan and Scandinavia.

The idea here is to empty the shark of all internal organs, then attach some stainless steel rods to the cartilage that the shark has in place of a spine.

"That will keep her back straight in the tank," Ingrao explained. "Then we'll fill her with gill net and some small balls to achieve neutral buoyancy so she looks natural in the tank."

Meanwhile, an army of media has descended upon the volunteer scientists snapping photos, rolling tape and interviewing various individuals.

"It's a media feeding frenzy," said one volunteer.

Then the members of the Fourth Estate were gone, as quietly and quickly as they had arrived.

The work continued under a canopy. Everyone, including Sarah Oldham, a King Middle School student from Anna Maria who occasionally assists

Ingrao, was engaged in the dissection, leaning in to study the shark.

"You learn so much here," Oldham said. "This is really interesting."

Unfortunately, it'll be a while before everyone else can learn from the great white shark.

"It's very costly to mount an exhibit," Ingrao said. "To get this shark on display from start to finish will take about \$75,000, and we have to raise that money."

Meanwhile, two smaller great whites — a newborn about four feet long and a yearling — are on display near Mollusk Hall at Mote.

"They were prepared using the same technique," Ingrao said.

"They really do look like they're swimming free," Oldham commented.

"Sharks are disappearing at a rapid rate," Hueter said. "It's important that people learn about them."

Anyone who wants to help with the expense of the exhibit can contact Mote's development office at 388-4441, ext. 373. Or you can mail a check directly to Mote Marine Laboratory, 1600 Ken Thompson Pkwy, Sarasota 34236. Make a note on the memo line of the check to designate that the tax-deductible contribution is for the shark exhibit.



PHOTO/CHUCK STEVENSON
Dr. Bob Hueter, head of shark research at Mote, notes the torpedo-like shape of the shark's nose.



PHOTO/CHUCK STEVENSON
The great white has sensory organs along its nose.



PHOTO/CHUCK STEVENSON
These are the triangular teeth of a mature shark.